Pitfalls in the Quest for Knowledge

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INTRODUCTION

Praise be to Allah; we praise Him, seek His forgiveness, and turn to Him in repentance. We seek refuge with Him from the evils of our souls and the evils of our deeds. Whomever Allah guides, none can misguide, and whomever Allah leads astray, none can guide. I bear witness that there is no god but Allah alone without partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.

One of the most exciting aspects of the present Islamic Awakening is that a large number of our young people are going forward to seek Islamic knowledge. By doing so, they ensure that this awakening is firmly grounded in a correct understanding of Islam and that it will continue to be distinguished by right guidance.

It is the duty of the scholars to embrace these students, teach them, guide them, and honor them. The students of today will be the scholars and leaders of tomorrow.

One of the first things that a student of religious knowledge needs to know is how to go about the task of seeking knowledge. He needs to be shown clearly the proper way to attain Islamic knowledge and how to avoid the pitfalls that lie in his path.

Being heedless of these pitfalls can lead to unfortunate circumstances that can be very hard to remedy. They can send the student right off the path of knowledge into all forms of deviance.

The quest for knowledge is a passion that can lead to hastiness. There is a tendency among students to pluck fruit, so to speak, before it is ripe.

This is why I see it as my duty towards the next generation of promising students to point out to them the different mistakes and forms of deviation that new students are prone to. I speak from my personal experience in my own quest for knowledge and from the experiences of my peers and colleagues. I will cite real examples from the world we live in today.

It cannot go unnoticed that times change. Each generation has its own problems and circumstances. Therefore, we need to address topics like these over and over again in order to provide fresh insights. This may be the reason why scholars of every era have written on this topic, from the time of Ibn `Abd al-Barr and al-Khatîb al-Baghdâdî until today. Each of these scholars had to wrestle with the problems of his time. He has to face a unique set of obstacles and hindrances and determine how to overcome them.

I hope that this brief treatise will help to guide the student on his way. I ask Allah to guide us and put our affairs right. I pray that He lets us recognize the truth for what it is and helps us to follow it, and that he lets us see falsehood for what it is and helps us to avoid it. And may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon our Prophet Muhammad and upon his family and Companions.

CHAPTER ONE
Seeking Knowledge for the Sake of Knowledge

Sometimes a student will say: "I am seeking knowledge for the sake of knowledge", implying that he is not after a diploma or a degree or something else of that sort. However, what he is doing is also wrong.

One of the pitfalls that a student can fall into is to seek knowledge for its own sake. Knowledge is a desire like any other human desire. It can be sought for the pure pleasure of acquiring it and not for the sake of Allah. People love to discover new things. It is a natural human inclination. When a person strives long and hard to find something out, then comes upon the answer, it can be quite exhilarating. This encourages him to study further.

Islam, however, does not call upon us to seek Islamic knowledge for its own sake, but to put it to use. The scholars of old used to say: "Knowledge calls out to us with actions. It is either answered by actions or it goes away."

Allah describes the people of knowledge in the following way: "Those who were given knowledge beforehand, when it is recited to them, fall on their faces in prostration. And they say: 'Glory be to our Lord. Truly the promise of our Lord is fulfilled. They fall on their faces crying and it increases them in humility." [*Sûrah al-Isrâ'*: 107-109]

Here we see how knowledge gives them humility and makes them fall in prostration to Allah.

Allah says: "Only those who have knowledge truly fear Allah." [*Sûrah Fâtir*: 28] Using this verse as their evidence, some people of knowledge have opined that the scholars are the "best of Creation" referred to in Allah's words: "Those who have faith and do righteous deeds, they are the best of Creation. There reward is with Allah; gardens beneath which rivers flow. They will dwell therein forever. Allah will be well pleased with them and they with Him. This is for those who fear their Lord." [*Sûrah al-Bayyinah*: 7-8].

They argue that since the "best of Creation" are "those who fear their Lord" and since the only people who truly fear their Lord are the scholars, it follows then that the scholars are the best of Creation.

How could it be otherwise when *Sunnah* declares the scholars to be the inheritors of the Prophets? This means that scholars are the best people after the Prophets, if they are true scholars. People today have become confused about the meaning of the word "scholar" in this context. Some assume it refers to any person with specialized knowledge in any field, like medicine, engineering, or chemistry. The true scholar in the context of our discussion is a person who has knowledge about Allah, His religion, and His Law. Knowledge, in an abstract, theoretical sense, is not enough. It must also affect the heart.

Our pious predecessors did not recognize anyone as a scholar merely because had amassed a lot of knowledge. His knowledge had to show in his behavior. He had to be humble, ascetic, and reserved. Some of the pious predecessors had said: "The scholar is the one who fears Allah so much that it affects his character, his conduct – and his knowledge."

CHAPTER TWO
Dealings with Other People

Dealings with Parents

Sometimes you find a student of religious knowledge spending considerable time in the company of scholars, listening to them respectfully and attentively. However, if you were to see how he conducts himself at home with his parents, you would get a shock. He is harsh and uncouth. When his parents ask him to do something for them, he bangs his fist into the wall and shouts at them about how busy he is. Busy with what? Busy reading Islamic books, seeking knowledge, sitting with scholars, and engaging in good works!

This is all well and good, but should he not also be busy looking after his parents? Has not Allah commanded us to be good to our parents – even pagan parents? He has commanded us to be good to our parents even if they call us to abandon our religion and engage in idolatry. Allah says: "If they strive to make you worship others along with Me of whom you have no knowledge, then do not obey them. Yet offer them your good company in this life". [*Sûrah Luqmân*: 15]

So how much more deserving are they of your respect if they happen to be Muslims, even very sinful Muslims? How can a child claim to be seeking Islamic knowledge and be counted among the pious if he disobeys his parents, treats them harshly, or abandons them with tears in their eyes and goes on his merry way?

It is startling to see a student who gets happy every time he hears a scholarly verdict that diminishes the rights of the parents. If he hears, for instance, that due to dire circumstances, going for jihad in a certain country has become an obligation on everyone and it is no longer necessary to solicit the permission of one's parents, he gets happy. He might even go to participate in that jihad, leaving his parents behind crying. Why? Because some scholar ruled that his parents' permission is not necessary. If he hears from

another scholar that obeying his parents is obligatory and their permission is mandatory, he ignores that ruling and heaps a bunch of accusations against the integrity of that scholar. Why? Because he finds it difficult to obey his parents. On the other hand, he likes the idea of traveling and going to and fro.

When he is away from home and away from his parents he is gentle and good-natured. He is cheerful and serves his Muslim brothers and fellow students. His personality changes abruptly when he returns home. He becomes harsh and domineering and expects everyone else in the house to listen to him and accept his opinions.

When we look for the positive role that this young man plays at home, we do not find it. He can neither disseminate knowledge to the members of his household nor warn them against the corruptive influences that pervade the home. He cannot even venture to provide them with books, cassettes, and magazines that might benefit them. He cannot be of benefit to them because of the bad treatment that he metes out. They will not listen to him, because he has destroyed the relationship that he had with them.

Sometimes, a student of this type tries to justify his behavior by citing the example of some Companions who were forced to go against their parents for the sake of their religion. He will mention that `Ubaydah b, al-Jarrâh killed his father. Of course, he fails to mention the fact that those people had parents who were not only unbelievers, but were violently attacking the Muslims at that time.

This same student probably has Muslim parents. Maybe they are sinful Muslims. They might even be good Muslims, but because of the young man's personality, bad upbringing, or youthful zeal, he does not treat them well. They, therefore, take a negative stance with him which only makes him think worse of them. This is a grave pitfall indeed.

Dealings with Classmates and Colleagues

Sometimes a student of knowledge fails in his duty to benefit his classmates and neighbors. He has no effect on them whatsoever, neither at school if he is a student nor at work if he is an employee. He is equally ineffective in the neighborhood in which he lives. However, when he is among his fellow students of religious knowledge and other religious young people, he becomes very active. He fails to make calling others to Islam his primary purpose. He also fails to realize that this should be his purpose at all times, whether he is at home, at work, or in the marketplace. By behaving this way, he is not conducting himself in the manner that a scholar or student of religious knowledge is supposed to conduct himself. He should be calling people to Allah, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong.

`Umar b. Abî Salamah said: "I was a young boy in the home of Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him). My hand used to go all around the plate when I ate, so Allah's Messenger

(peace be upon him) said to me: 'O young boy! Mention the name of Allah, eat with your right hand, and eat from what is in front of you.'"[1]

We can see from this incident how the Prophet (peace be upon him) was concerned with guidance and upbringing, even at the dinner table.

His Companions were the same, as were the scholars who came after them and followed their example. They took advantage of every opportunity to teach people something good and invite them to the way of Allah. They would capture the people's hearts with their good conduct and their respectful dealings. Then they would provide guidance for the people.

A poet once said:

Be good to the people and you will enslave their hearts.
How often does goodness a person enslave!

We do not want to enslave the people's hearts. Their hearts should be enslaved to Allah alone. What we want, however, is for Islamic workers and students of knowledge to know how to touch the people's hearts with kindness and impeccable manners, so they can spread righteousness among the people and impart the knowledge that they possess. Religious knowledge has a duty levied upon it that the possessor of knowledge must pay. If he fails to pay it, then his knowledge will be bereft of blessings.

Dealings with One's Spouse

The closest person to you after your parents is your husband or wife. In spite of this, we find that all too frequently the wife of a student of knowledge complains that her husband does not benefit her with his knowledge. He never teaches her. Sometimes she is ignorant about her religion. She may even be engaged in deviant behavior like dressing indecently, unveiling, and listening to music.

Some students have no other way of dealing with their wives other then asserting their authority over them. They order them around, telling them what they can and cannot do, rebuke them and spurn them. They might even abuse their wives and think that this is the way to put them right!

Does this student of religious knowledge ever read with his wife or inform her of what Allah and His Messenger (peace be upon him) say. Does he try to soften her heart by reminding her of Allah and by beautiful preachings? Does he teach her what is lawful and prohibited in Islam? Does he treat her well? We have to sadly admit that many students fail to do these things.

[1] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (4957). *Sahîh Muslim* (3767).

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Many women have come to my household complaining of their husbands. Those men are not the best among you."[2] How could they be the best of men when the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "The best of you is the one who is the best to his family, and I am the best of you to his family."[3]

How, then, can a student of religious knowledge be so good when he is among his friends and peers but so harsh and bitter when he is with his parents, siblings, and his wife? This is a form of inconsistency that is neither tenable nor tolerable.

CHAPTER THREE
Studying Particulars before Principles

Some students concern themselves with subsidiary matters before becoming grounded in the requisite principles. They focus on the most minor of issues while ignoring the major ones. Many students do this out of their love for debate and their desire to participate with others in the exchange of ideas. There are always a group of topics that students of knowledge discuss with each other for hours on end. Though these never number more than ten or twenty topics, rarely do students discuss with each other anything else.

A Few Examples:

- After rising from the bowing position in prayer, should you fold your hands over your chest or should you let them hang at your side?
- In prayer, should you remain seated for a moment after rising from the second prostration and before rising to the standing position?
- Should you move your finger while reciting the *tashahhud*, and how should it be moved? How should the hand be positioned? Likewise, should you move your finger while seated between the two prostrations?

These are from a limited number of questions that students tend to spend endless hours debating. At the same time, you find that they ignore fundamental matters of belief and sweeping principles of law. They do not bother to read up on these more important matters nor review them, because their fellow students are not discussing such matters. Therefore, such topics will not afford the student the opportunity to debate with his peers and show of his talents.

We are not among those who say that these secondary matters are trivial and that they should be ignored. Such a stance is undoubtedly wrong, since nothing about our religion is trivial. However, some matters need to be dealt with before others. General principles come before minor details. This is the proper approach to seeking knowledge. A student should also be cognizant of the fact that scholars are often in disagreement about secondary matters.

[2] *Sunan Abî Dâwûd* (2146). *Sunan al-Dârimî* (2122).
[3] *Sunan al-Tirmidhî* (3790). *Sunan Ibn Mâjah* (1967).

If you were to ask some students of religious knowledge about matters of belief, you would find their knowledge to be confused or deficient. If you were to ask him about the general precepts of Islamic Law, you would find him disdainful of them. He would be no better off when it comes to general ethics and matters of jurisprudence. However, you will find him well acquainted with a number of secondary questions that he focuses on to the exclusion of everything else.

This shows a student devoid of wisdom, since wisdom mandates putting everything in its proper place. It is blatantly unwise to fail to establish a basic article of belief because of being too busy establishing a *sunnah* act. It is equally foolish to get into arguments with people about some minor issue while neglecting the fundamentals of belief. We should not spend all of our time teaching people a single *sunnah* and neglect the widespread moral degradation that is afflicting our societies in this day and age.

We can all see that Muslim societies are the target of a vicious war that does not seek to remove only secondary matters and *sunnah* acts. This war targets the very foundations of our belief. Many of our societies are under the sway of men with deviant ideas: communists, socialists, secularists, and others. They attack Islam at its very roots, seeking to make the people doubt their faith.

Our societies are equally plagued by irreligious, licentious men who seek to turn our societies into dens of sin. Both of these groups have achieved their goals to a great extent. It is unwise for students of religious knowledge to ignore these developments and focus all of his energies on some minor points of law.

Each issue should be accorded the attention that it warrants. No single issue should be made into the topic of all discourse and debate.

We should not be neglectful of any *sunnah*. We should teach the people the guidance of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in all of its detail. At the same time, we must recognize that people are different. A person who is upright and virtuous and prays regularly needs to be taught all the *sunnah* acts of prayer. It is not enough for such a person to know only the basic, obligatory acts. We should teach him how to perfect his prayer.

At the same time, this should not get in the way of our calling to Islam those who are astray or sinful. We must call such people to the fundamentals of Islam and strive to bring them from their state of deviance and sin to the illumination of knowledge and faith.

We must not neglect these people. They must be our first priority. A person who has faith and is performing his prayers will, by Allah's grace, be in no grave danger if he dies without ever learning about a particular *sunnah* act. As for the other person who is engrossed in sin or misled by false beliefs, he is in grave danger. Therefore, saving him from peril is far more important than teaching the pious Muslim about a particular *sunnah*. Of course, it is our duty to do both if we can.

CHAPTER FOUR
Approaching the Sacred Texts in a Superficial Manner

Approaching the *Qur'ân* and *Sunnah* requires intellect, probity, experience, and a deep understanding of the intents and purposes of Islamic Law. It requires broad knowledge of the Arabic language and its idioms. Some students, however, possess none of these faculties. Moreover, some of them have no aptitude for Islamic Law. They cannot cope with uncertainties and multiple possibilities and have not the insight to derive rulings from their proper sources. Such people have a tendency to take a single text and derive from it all the legal rulings that come immediately to mind, and then adhere doggedly to these rulings, hurling at anyone who disagrees with them a number of unsavory epithets.

There are two closely associated problems here. One is that of taking an overly literal approach to the texts. The other is that of being hasty in drawing conclusions from them. Let us look at a few examples of each:

Taking an Overly Literal Approach to the Texts

First Example:

Take an issue related to Islamic beliefs. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "If anyone possesses four qualities, then he is a hypocrite, and whoever possesses one of these qualities has within him an aspect of hypocrisy until he gives it up. They are as follows: If he is entrusted with something, he betrays his trust. If he speaks, he lies. If he makes a covenant, he breaks it. If he gets into a dispute, he acts sinfully."[4]

Some people take this *hadîth* on its face value and ignore all the other texts dealing with hypocrisy. In this way, they fall into error. On one occasion, someone went so far as to say that the hypocrisy mentioned in the *hadîth* refers to absolute unbelief, so that anyone who breaks a promise, lies, breaches a covenant, or acts sinfully in an argument is an unbeliever and is no longer a Muslim!

This person, by making this declaration, has disregarded hundreds of passages from the *Qur'ân* and *Sunnah* that indicate that a sinner does not become an unbeliever on account of his sins. This is a principle of faith in Islam. Al-Tahâwî says in his classic treatise on Islamic beliefs: "The followers of Muhammad (peace be upon him) who commit major sins and die without repentance will not remain in the Fire forever as long as they die on monotheism, knowing Allah." This is a point of consensus among all orthodox Muslims. This shows us the danger of taking a cursory reading of one text and ignoring all the others.

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[4] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (33, 2279). *Sahîh Muslim* (88).

Second Example:

The prophet (peace be upon him) said: "No ablutions need to be made unless you hear the sound of flatulence or feel the passage of gas."[5]

If we were to take this *hadîth* on face value, no one would ever have to make ablution except for the stated causes. This is the literal meaning of the *hadîth*. But is it the intended meaning? The answer to this question is: certainly not! A person who wishes to pray must make ablutions after going to the bathroom, after waking up from sleep, and for other reasons. However, if a person was going to base his understanding solely on the literal meaning of the text cited above, he would have to come to that false conclusion.

This is why the people of knowledge have always emphasized the need to compile all the relevant texts on a matter before drawing any conclusions. Ahmad said: "If we did not receive a single *hadîth* in seventy different ways, we would never have understood it." He was referring here not only to different chains of transmission for a single *hadîth*, but also to numerous *hadîth* on a single topic.

Third Example:

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "No one should urinate in still water and then bathe in it."[6] Some literalist scholars of the past have opined that if a person were to urinate in a cup then pour the contents of the cup into the water, there would be no objection to bathing in it, since the only thing that the *hadîth* prohibits is direct urination![7]

This is a good example of severely dogmatic literalism. The intent of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in this *hadîth* is perfectly clear.

Hastiness in Drawing Conclusions from the Texts

We will now turn our attention to the problem of being hasty when attempting to derive rulings from the texts. The examples that we will be citing below are in fact matters of disagreement between scholars. Our point here is not to support a given legal position, but to illustrate the importance of being methodical and deliberate when dealing with the sacred texts.

First Example:

There are numerous *hadîth* in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "There is no prayer for one who has not made ablution, and there is no ablution for one who has not

[5] *Musnad Ahmad* (9712). *Sunan al-Tirmidhî* (69). *Sunan Ibn Mâjah* (508).
[6] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (232). *Sahîh Muslim* (424).
[7] You can read about this opinion and the refutation of it in Ibn Hazm, *al-Muhallâ* (1/166) and al-Nawawî, *al-Majmû`* (1/118).

invoked the name of Allah upon performing it."[8] Numerous scholars have attested to the authenticity of this *hadîth*. Some scholars have understood from it that ablutions are only valid if the name of Allah is invoked before performing them. This was the opinion of Ishâq b. Râhawayh, one opinion of Ahmad, and the view of a number of *hadîth* scholars.

Now, I do not intend to discuss the merits or demerits of this opinion, but I would like to point out the other opinion and the evidence used to support it.

The majority of scholars, including Abû Hanîfah, Mâlik, and al-Shâfi`î, consider mentioning Allah's name before performing ablutions as a preferential *sunnah* act and do not see it as obligatory. This is also one of the opinions related from Ahmad and the view of many later scholars including Ibn Taymiyah, as well as the opinion of most contemporary jurists.

Should we assume that all of these eminent scholars took the *hadîth* mentioned above and threw it against the wall, like some rash students today have insinuated?

In actuality, a few classical scholars did not deem that *hadîth* to be authentic. Many of them, however, did consider it authentic but had a different understanding of the words "there is no ablution for one who has not invoked the name of Allah upon performing it". They did not take the *hadîth* to mean that ablutions without mentioning Allah's name are invalid, but simply that such ablutions are not performed in the best manner. There is a decent amount of evidence to support their interpretation.

First of all, there is a *hadîth* with a good chain of transmission in *Sunan Abî Dawûd* wherein a man comes to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and asks him how purification is to be carried out. So the Prophet (peace be upon him) calls for water and gives him a demonstration. He washes his hands three times, washes his face once, wipes over his head, traces his wet fingers and thumbs around his ears, and washes his feet three times. Then he says: "This is how ablutions are to be made. Whoever adds anything to this or leaves anything out has done wrong."[9]

The man asking the question was a desert Arab who had no idea how to perform ablutions. Therefore, since the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not teach him to invoke the name of Allah, we can safely assume that it is not necessary to do so.

A second piece of evidence comes from the fact that at least twenty-two Companions have described how the Prophet (peace be upon him) made ablutions and not one of them mentioned that he invoked Allah's name.

Another argument offered by the scholars is that a full ritual bath can be done in lieu of performing ablutions, and nowhere is it mentioned that Allah's name must be invoked before taking such a bath. Scholars actually assume that mentioning Allah's name is

[8] *Musnad Ahmad* (9050, 16054, 22152, 25894, 25896). *Sunan Abî Dâwûd* (92). *Sunan Ibn Mâjah* (392, 393, 394).
[9] *Sunan Abî Dawûd* (116).

recommended before performing a ritual bath on the strength of the fact that the regular ablutions are performed as part of the bath.

A fourth piece of evidence is that mentioning the name of Allah is not given in the verse of the *Qur'ân* that spells out to us how ablutions are to be made. Allah says: "O you who believe! When you prepare for prayer, wash your faces and your arms up to the elbows. Wipe your head with water and wash your feet to the ankles." [*Sûrah al-Mâ'idah*: 6]

These arguments show us that the opinion of the majority of the scholars is not due to their pointedly ignoring the *hadîth*, as some hasty students today are wont to believe. It is, in fact, based on sound juristic principles as well as a deeper insight into the meaning of the text that takes into account other textual evidence.

Second Example

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "When any one of you wakes up from his sleep, he should not place his hands in a bowl of water until after he washes them three times, because he does not know what his hands might have touched while he was asleep."[10]

Some scholars of the past understood from this *hadîth* that it is obligatory to wash your hands after sleeping before you can place them in a bowl of water and that it is forbidden to do otherwise. This was one of Ahmad's opinions on the matter. Some contemporary scholars have held this view as well.

On the other hand, according to most scholars, including Abû Hanîfah, Mâlik, al-Shâfi`î, and Ahmad in another one of his opinions, doing so is merely recommended. Should we assume that these eminent scholars simply tossed this *hadîth* behind their backs or that they just did not care very much about the command of the Prophet (peace be upon him)? Some brash young students today are actually saying such things about them.

These scholars are as far removed as you can get from such accusations. They merely took into account a number of factors which demonstrate that the command given in the *hadîth* is indicative of preference, not obligation. Let us consider the following:

First of all, there is the reason cited by the Prophet (peace be upon him) for the order that he gave. He said: "…because he does not know what his hands might have touched while he was asleep." Now, the ruling about impurity in Islamic Law is that unless you are certain that there is some impurity upon something, you are not obligated to wash it. Suspicions are not enough to make a washing obligatory. Therefore, it would not be obligatory on a person to wash his hands after waking from sleep for the reason that the Prophet (peace be upon him) gave. This leads us to believe that the command to wash the hands is meant merely to encourage a preferable act.

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[10] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî*. *Sahîh Muslim* (416).

Another indicator that we are not dealing here with an obligation is that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said we should wash our hands three times. In Islamic Law, if impurities are removed after only one washing, then one washing is sufficient.

A third indicative factor is that there is another authentic *hadîth* that goes: "When one of you wakes up, he should rinse his nose out with water three times, because Satan spends the night in his nasal passages."[11] In this case, consensus has been established among all scholars save Ibn Hazm that rinsing the nose is not obligatory.

All of these factors support the idea that the *hadîth* encourages washing the hands after waking from sleep and does not obligate it.

I would like to repeat here that I am not saying all this to support one opinion over another. You are free to agree with these opinions or disagree with them. Someone might say that it is obligatory to mention Allah's name before making ablutions or feel that it is obligatory to wash one's hands upon waking. There is nothing wrong with this. My only purpose in bringing up these issues is to show how dealing with texts requires understanding and knowledge of how to deal with numerous pieces of evidence and diverse indicative factors. I also wished to highlight the necessity of referring back to the discussions of people of knowledge when investigating any issue. This allows the student to choose the opinion that convinces him on the basis of knowledge and probity, not merely on a cursory reading of a single text. Then, whatever position you choose in these matters is acceptable, because you have a precedent for your choice among the earlier scholars.

A Look at the Zâhirî (Literalist) School of Law

It is appropriate at this point to discuss the great Zâhirî scholar Ibn Hazm. No doubt, he was a great jurist with a number of great works to his credit. The most important of these is his legal encyclopedia entitled *al-Muhallâ*, a substantial work of law containing numerous insights. However, it also contains its share of errors and mistakes. All works of such scope do.

The problem is that some students read *al-Muhallâ* and become totally enamored of Ibn Hazm. Ibn Hazm has a very assertive style of writing, especially when it comes to refuting his opponents' use of analogous reasoning. His specialty is showing how his opponents contradict themselves. Some students become enthralled by this style and end up judging by his decisions in all matters, whether or not his opinion agrees with that of the majority of the scholars. They accept from him even his strangest rulings.

This behavior is incorrect. For this reason, I feel that a beginning student should not read *al-Muhallâ*, but should start with other books that are more comparative, more balanced in their treatment of the issues, and less confrontational. In this way, the student will develop a broad perspective and learn the proper way in which matters should be discussed. I recommend the works of scholars like Ibn `Abd al-Barr, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn

[11] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (3052).

Qudâmah, and Ibn Taymiyah. Afterwards, the student will be more prepared to read whatever reputable books he chooses.

CHAPTER FIVE
Craving Novelty

Novelty sometimes enlivens a person. When a person hears something mundane, he rarely takes notice of it. However, when he hears something new and strange, he gives it his undivided attention. A person walking down a busy street will see countless vehicles go by and will scarcely be bothered with them. If a strange car passes by or some unusual event happens, he will stop along with many other gawkers to take a look at it.

The same goes for academic pursuits. Many students seem to know nothing but the strangest of opinions and deal only with matters that are prone to confusion. We have already discussed how some students make themselves very proficient in discussing some matters of scholarly debate and how they can quote the opinions of this scholar and that. These same students, however, often fail to have knowledge of the matters in which the scholars have all agreed with one another.

In the same way we find that some students have an insatiable appetite for what is novel or strange. If such a student happens to stumble upon an opinion that is out of the ordinary, he takes to it and may even come to its defense. He does this to satisfy his hidden desire for all things strange as well as his desire to stand apart from others.

For this reason, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that the opinion of the majority of scholars is usually – but not always – the most correct. The reason for this is that when the scholars are generally agreed about a matter and only one or two hold a differing view, there is usually some reason for their agreement. The majority is not always right, but we should exercise a bit of caution before adopting a strange or unusual position.

A good example of a strange opinion is the view of some scholars that it is forbidden for women to wear gold rings. Then there is the opinion that a pilgrim must only perform his pilgrimage in the manner known as *tamattu`*. When we look for how many people held these views from the early days of Islam up to today, we find that they can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Often we can not be certain that those to whom the opinion is attributed actually held that opinion.

Why then, do we find so many young students take to opinions like these? One reason might be that they are convinced by the arguments for that opinion without having yet developed the aptitude to analyze the evidence. Sometimes it is just because of the appeal of the unusual or strange. Therefore, we must be extra cautious when we are about to go against the vast majority of the scholars. We should only do so when we have clear and unequivocal evidence to support us.

CHAPTER SIX
Bias for a Certain Scholar's Views

This bias is usually to be found in a student with respect to the sheikh under whom he is studying. If the sheikh happens to be a *hadîth* specialist, the student will be biased towards his sheikh's judgments about particular *hadîth*. If the sheikh is a jurist, then the student will be biased towards his legal rulings. The student will go out of his way to defend the sheikh's opinions and popularize them.

Such bias is an old illness. It preys on ignorance. True scholars decry bias and warn others against it. When a person is well grounded in knowledge, he does not let bias overtake him. He sees it as a disservice to his sheikh that he agrees with and promotes his views when the evidence indicates something to the contrary.

A true student of knowledge never limits himself to a single sheikh, thinking that he is all the world. This is the root of bias. It is good to be conversant with the views of many. Each sheikh has his methods and his strong points. Students should get all the good they can from their sheikhs and not restrict themselves to just one.

What is most peculiar is to see a student who is severely biased to a living scholar but gets vexed when he hears about someone having a bias for a scholar of the past. He ridicules someone else for being a "biased Hanbalî" or a "bigoted Hanafî" while he is totally enamored of some living personality.

The truth is, if you must have a bias towards someone, it is better to be biased towards one of the scholars of old. Those scholars are people whose knowledge has been attested to. There is unanimous agreement that they were erudite and exceptional people of knowledge. Their opinions were generally sound and reliable. As for those who are living, they are still prone to temptation.

In any event, bias is something that we do not approve of. Blind following is also wrong, whether it be of the living or of the dead. A person should strive to follow the *Qur'ân* and *Sunnah*. He should take his knowledge from scholars who act upon those two sources. When he takes from them their legal rulings, he must also take from them the evidence for those rulings.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Flawed Approaches to Dealing with Preferable Acts

There are a number of ways that people fall into error when trying to put into practice acts deemed by Islamic Law to be preferable.

1. Practicing a supposedly preferable act before confirming its validity

Some students, when they hear about a preferable act that is supposedly established in the *Sunnah*, they hasten to put it into practice before making sure that it is authentic.

Once, I saw a young man walking about with a turban wrapped around his head. In our country, Saudi Arabia, such a turban is very peculiar, so his dress was quite conspicuous and strange. I approached him and asked: "Why are you wearing this turban in stark contrast to the customs of your country?"

He replied: "Because the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to wear it." He then went on to mention some fabricated *hadîth* about the virtues of the turban, one of which states that it is the dress of the angels. The truth of the matter is that there is not a single authentic *hadîth* that extols the virtues of the turban.

Another example of applying a supposedly *sunnah* act is shaving the moustache. Some students are in the habit of doing this because of certain *hadîth* that they read without referring to what the scholars have had to say on the matter.

A slightly different case is the tendency some young men have to condemn the practice of standing to greet someone who comes into the room. They do so on the basis of *hadîth* that allegedly prohibit this practice.

Now, I am not going to say that there is no room for disagreement on this issue, but the prohibition of people standing in reverence to their kings has little to do with a person standing to shake his brother's hand.

Sheikh `Abd al-`Azîz b. Bâz gave a very good answer to a questioner who asked about this matter. He said: "This is a sign of good manners. As long as standing to greet someone and shake his hand is the custom in your country, then it is simply part of good manners and is not prohibited. And Allah knows best."

Therefore, before a person practices something he believes to be part of the *Sunnah*, he should make sure that it actually is.

2. Going overboard in putting into practice an act established by the Sunnah

Once it is established that a given act is part of the Sunnah, it should be put into practice in a balanced and reasonable manner. This is especially true if putting it into practice involves other people.

Take the matter of straightening the ranks of worshippers before performing the congregational prayer. I have noticed that some young people seem to think that straightening the ranks means that everyone should press his heels against the heels of those standing on either side of him. This is clearly going overboard in the matter and causes discomfort for the other worshippers. It also causes the person doing it to take his

mind off his prayer. Is this behavior really established by the *Sunnah*? Let us look at the evidence.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "You should straighten your ranks or Allah will bring divisions between you."

Al-Nu`mân b. Bashîr, the narrator of the *hadîth*, then observed: "I have seen that one of us would press his heel against his companion's heel and his shoulder against his shoulder."[12]

When we consider this *hadîth* closely, it becomes apparent that the case being made with it is unacceptable.

First of all, the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not command us to touch our heels. He only commanded us to straighten our ranks in prayer. This just means that everyone should be in line with each other; no person should not be more forward or more to the back.

Also, al-Nu`mân said: "I have seen that one of us would press his heel against his companion's heel." What comes to mind is that the person being spoken about did this at the beginning of his prayer to make sure that he was in line with the people next to him, since the heel is a good way to determine this. Therefore, as long as a person is sure that he is in line with everyone else, then he does not have to keep contact between his heel and the heel of his companion.

A third point is that it is almost impossible to literally place your heel against the heel of the person standing next to you. You actually have to extend your foot outward. The same goes for the shoulder. You often have to lean into the other person. If you lean into the person on the right, you end up widening the gap between you and the person on the left.

This shows us that the *hadîth*, on the face of it, is not telling us to go out of our way to press our heels together. It is only telling us to avoid gaps in our ranks and that we should all stand in a straight line when we pray. Some people go overboard in putting this into practice and cause a lot of discomfort and consternation for their fellow worshippers.

Another example is an imam who, wishing to apply the *Sunnah* in prayer, prolongs the congregational prayer inordinately. You might find him reading the chapters *al-A`râf* and *al-Tûr* during the sunset prayer, justifying himself with some *hadîth* that show it was a practice of the Prophet (peace be upon him). By doing this, he places hardship on the congregation and causes some of them to avoid coming to prayer.

It is strange that he justifies himself with what the Prophet (peace be upon him) did on occasion, but neglects the Prophet's command when he said: "If one of you leads the

[12] *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (676). *Sahîh Muslim* (659, 660).

people in prayer, then make it short, because among the people there will be children, elderly individuals, and those who are sick." In one narration, he also said: "…and those who have a need to fulfill."[13]

We say to such people: Is this what you do in the name of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (peace be upon him)? Taking the condition of the people into consideration is also part of the *Sunnah*. Lengthening the prayer is not all that the *Sunnah* entails. We must be moderate in doing so and consider the needs of the believers.

3. Failure to weight the merits and demerits of doing something

An old saying goes that a man builds his castle while tearing another castle down. A person may perform some preferred act established by the *Sunnah*, but in the process of doing so, neglect another act which is obligatory. Similarly, a person may avoid something that is disliked in Islamic Law, but in doing so falls into something that is prohibited. This is clearly wrong.

Islam does not encourage divisions. Fostering rancor and hatred are not among its objectives. A person might stress applying a preferred act so much that he causes the people to turn away from him. He might foster hatred between them as well. This is why the people of knowledge have said: "Reconciling the hearts of the people is required, even if it means leaving off an act that is recommended by the *Sunnah*."

Let us look at a few examples:

First Example:

If someone comes to a group of people who are in the habit of saying "*Bismillâh al-Rahmân ar-Rahîm*" out loud when performing their audible prayers, then he should do so as well if he leads them in prayer. Not doing so could cause them to disdain him or bring about differences among them. It could lead to an argument breaking out in the mosque. The scholars have determined that it is alright to recite these words out loud if it will foster unity among the people in the mosque. Likewise, if he comes across people who do not say "*âmîn*" audibly during their prayers, he should do the same, even if he is of the opinion that it should be said audibly.

Second Example:

Sometimes, disputes erupt with respect to the number of units of prayer that should be performed for the *Tarâwîh* prayer in Ramadân. It often leads to heated arguments, lengthy debates, and divisions within the community. The matter however, is only whether performing a certain number of prayer units is preferable or merely permitted.

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13 *Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (88, 662). *Sahîh Muslim* (714, 715, 716).

Third Example:

Some people take the issue of shortening the clothes to extremes. Some young people only allow their garments to fall below their knees to the length of four fingers. Some allow their garments to fall halfway own their shins. I do not say that what they are doing is wrong. What I do say however is that if a young man wears a garment of reasonable length that neither falls below the ankles nor attracts undue attention, then this is more likely to be acceptable to the people and have a positive effect on them.

This type of exaggeration that we see in the matter of shortening one's clothing may be due to a certain way of understanding the *Sunnah*. It may also be due to a hidden desire to show off. If a person wishes to test his heart in such a matter, he should look towards the preferable acts in the *Sunnah* that he performs that are not seen by others, acts that require some effort. This would include keeping up the remembrance of Allah and praying voluntary prayers at home. In matters like these, one really feels the effects of practicing recommended acts.

4. Condemning others for not engaging in recommended acts

Some people treat recommended acts as if they are obligatory. If they see someone neglecting one of these recommended acts, they condemn him, though it may be that the matter at hand is one wherein people differ. A good example of this is the practice of sitting for a moment after making prostration before rising to perform the next unit of prayer. Another example is the practice of praying two units of prayer upon entering the mosque at times when formal prayers are forbidden by Islamic Law. Sometimes, those who perform these acts have a tendency to condemn those who do not.

This is wrong. These are not Islamic duties. There is room for leeway here. We should focus our attentions on matters of primary importance before attending to these matters where the evidence points almost equally well to more than one opinion. A person who prefers one opinion on these matters should not try to compel others to agree with him. We must research such matters in a wise and insightful manner, without trying to impose our view on others and without becoming severe.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Some Ways to Protect Ourselves from these Pitfalls

There are many ways that a young student can protect himself from these errors. Among them are the following:

1. A student of religious knowledge should read works written on the etiquettes of seeking knowledge. Many scholars have written on this issue. A few of the more important of these works are as follows:

- Ibn `Abd al-Barr – *Jâmi` Bayân al-`Ilm wa Fadluhu* (A Compilation Expounding Knowledge and its Virtues)
- Al-Khatîb al-Baghdâdî – *al-Jâmi` fî Âdâb al-Râwî wa Akhlâq al-Sâmî* (A Collection of Etiquettes for the Narrator and the Listener)
- Ibn al-Jawzî – *Sayd al-Khâtir* (The Pursuits of the Mind)
- Al-Sam`ânî – *Adab al-Imlâ' wa al-Istimlâ'* (Etiquettes of Writing and Dictating)
- Al-Nawawî – the Prologue of his work entitled *al-Majmû`* (The Collected)
- Al-Ghazâlî – the Prologue of his work entitled *Ihyâ' `Ulûm al-Dîn* (The Revival of the Sciences of the Faith)
- Ibn Jamâ`ah – *Tadhkirah al-Sâmi` wa al-Mutakallam* (A Reminder for the Speaker and the Listener)
- Al-Dhahabî – *Bayân Zaghal al-`Ilm* (An Exposition on False Knowledge)
- Al-Shawkânî – *Muntahâ al-Arab fî Adab al-Talab* (Reaching the Goal: Etiquettes of Seeking Knowledge)
- Sheikh Bakr Abû Zayd – *Hilyah Tâlib al-`Ilm* (Adornments of the Seeker of Knowledge)

2. A student should be ever vigilant in monitoring himself. Whenever he does something, he should consider his state of mind and ask himself what prompted him to do what he did. He should not be unmindful of his own affairs. He should not rush headlong into things recklessly. He should think and ponder his moves, making sure he is not indulging his personal desires in the name of the Prophetic *Sunnah*.

3. A student of religious knowledge should take his knowledge from trustworthy scholars. He should sit before them in humility and show them courtesy and deference so he can learn from them both knowledge and proper conduct.

4. A student should keep the company of other students. He should give them advice and accept advice from them. These students need to act as mirrors for each other and point out each other's faults and errors.

5. A student needs to have a sound approach to acquiring knowledge. His desire for knowledge should not let him get carried away collecting information haphazardly. This may afford him some measure of "culture", but it does not lead to any real knowledge.

6. A student of religious knowledge must avoid major and minor sins. He should be as Ibn al-Mubârak says in verse:

Disdain the sins great and small, for this is piety.
Like a man treading on thorns, be wary of what you see.
Belittle not the smallest sins, for mountains of pebbles be.

CONCLUSION

We ask Allah to assist us in living by the *Qur'ân* and *Sunnah*. We pray that He lets us recognize the truth for what it is and helps us to follow it, and that he lets us see falsehood for what it is and helps us to avoid it.

May Allah be praised; and may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon His Messenger Muhammad and upon his family and Companions.